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ABSTRACT

Today's students are presented with a confusing perspective on writing that, on the one hand, defines the production of a written text as an act that simply transcribes thoughts and, on the other hand, defines writing as in and of itself an act of knowing. Teachers confound the student writer's schizophrenia by reinforcing the "product" approach to writing. Furthermore, because today's students are influenced and shaped by oral contexts, the emphasis of a print culture creates incredible stress and tension in the individual composer. Writing remains, however, the primary means of retaining self-conscious control over cognitive processes in a world of secondary orality. The act of writing is the process that enables inner speech and oral dialogue to synthesize. Writing becomes the means of structuring the spoken word so that it can recapture the authority it once had in primary oral cultures. The contrasts between oral and written media are central to the problems of teaching writing today. Students must be taught to use writing to explore and know about their own ideas and feelings. Students should see the process of revision as part of the writing-talking relationship. In the process of composing, students must come to realize how their inner speech naturally connects with the culture's general written record. Only then will the habit of private, inner speech, that in a highly literate culture is actually learned in earliest childhood, become a positive and useful way of maintaining individual perspective in a world of often disembodied oral voices. (HOD)

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"Teaching Writing in the Condition of
Secondary Orality"

Walter Ong's scholarly career has focussed over the past thirty years on the effects changes in communication media have had on human society and the individual. This paper will explore a few of Ong's theories as they explain the relationship the approximately 2,000 year shift from primarily oral to primarily written culture might have on the teaching of composition.

Ong, in The Presence of the Word, argues that oral-aural cultures are marked by a far higher degree of participation and drama in their productions of the word. The human nervous system, in an oral-aural society, by nature, dramatizes the act of making meaning because it demands that speakers and listeners combine in a participatory and performative construction of meaning. Since primary oral cultures have no written legal or technical record of past ideas and current laws and rites to offset the dramatic give-and-take in the making of meaning, the participants in the communicative process believe that they are engaging in an act that is central to the maintenance of both the individual sense of self and the social fabric within which that self operates. This sense of belief, combined with the

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naturally dramatic and sacred nature of oral communication--where meaning comes magically into and out of being through the human voice and the hearer's nervous system--instill the entire communication process with a pivotal sense of significance and vitality. Belief generates conviction; conviction makes the oral voice resonant with an implicit faith in the importance of social cohesion and the individual's function within that social context.

Certainly it is true that primary oral cultures had their own means of preserving cultural structures as centered in the word. The research on oral formulaic of Milman Parry and Eric Havelock in current eastern European and early Greek cultures respectively, and of F. P. Magoun and J. B. Bessinger in their work with Anglo-Saxon, have shown us how tag-lines, aphorisms, and the use of endlessly variable linguistic structures contributed to the ongoing sense of created expectation, sense of ending, and cultural fulfillment and reinforcement in the oral culture's verbal paideia. We cannot assume, however, that the formularizing structures of the oral poet, however binding on the repertoire of the composer or on the expectations of hearers, had an effect on oral audiences that is at all similar to the effects that literacy and the printed record has on today's writers.

Today's writers remain self-conscious and objective. They, in contrast to members of oral audiences, do not even attempt to sustain the illusion of dramatic immediacy that was

so important to the oral performance. Music and the rise and fall and cadence of the voice brought alive in the interiors of the members of an oral audience the presence, the magic, the drama of the evolving word. Certainly this immersion in the performance obviated critical perspective and distance--only a bad performance was criticized in an oral culture, simply because the recognized heroic structures and forms of action and dialogue were unsuccessfully presented by the poet. The elements of the poem itself were part of the shared cultural heritage, as part of that heritage they might be poorly constructed and badly performed but they were not in themselves questionable. Poet and audience were believers in the shared, dramatic voice. The oral composer, in an advanced oral culture was, by nature and training, invested with cultural authority and a belief in the social significance of what he or she was doing.

In literate, highly technological cultures, however, structures and forms must be originally woven from the yarn of culturally-inherited language, but writers, in the acts of composing, and readers in the acts of reading, are actually using the cues on the page to develop and clarify meaning. In oral cultures, meaning and significance is composed over time while the poet and audience plug in to a specific and relatively conscious re-configuration of the drama of meaning. In written cultures, the overbearing sense of existing written record and document, of an endless repository of texts on any important,

and unimportant, issue influences what Lev Vygotsky has termed "inner speech"--that stream of verbal thought that knits together the individual and socially-constructed languages of the literate composer. Literate composers are synthesizing one stream of language that is totally inside them and another stream of language that is totally outside them. The oral composer and audience are involved in a more unified process of bringing the word into being.

Ong is not suggesting that we re-organize the human nervous system, the "sensorium" as he puts it, along oral-aural lines. Rather he is suggesting that teachers of the composing or reading processes be recognized for what they are and, simultaneously, re-invested with the sense of belief that is necessary to all successful communications, oral or written.

Our students do not see the value of writing as a means of composing. They are, rather, immersed in a confusing perspective on writing that, on the one hand, defines the production of a written text as an act that simply transcribes thoughts and, on the other hand, defines writing as in and of itself an act of knowing. Teachers of reading and writing compound the writer's schizophrenia by reinforcing what has come to be called by current researchers the "product" approach to teaching writing. Writing, to these teachers, is learned either by imitating, studying, or analyzing the written products of other writers, usually professionals, or it is learned by using writing as the means by which ideas learned in class are

transcribed on to paper to justify a course grade. These latter types of classroom assignments James Britton has called the "dummy run," the assignment in which students go back over what they have learned in order to get the high grade.

What writing teachers do when assigning or teaching writing in this way is reinforce the student's attitude toward writing as a secondary rather than primary medium. Ong points out, in Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, that for many centuries--from the early sophistic and technical rhetoric through Hellenic Greece, through the forensic-technical rhetoric of Rome, and well into the manuscript rhetoric of the earlier and later middle ages--writing was used to provide more conscious structure to the oral word. It was not yet, in itself, considered a primary medium of information storage or retrieval, nor was it even close to being considered a primary means of knowing and composing. Composition itself was still a primarily oral act, embodied in the two, four, or seven-part oration of classical, forensic rhetoric. It was the rhetorical act itself--usually oral--that demanded immediate synthesis and learning.

This point seems clearest when we consider the author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium's and Cicero's treatments of both memory theory and arrangement. The ad Herennium author's treatment of memory is decidedly modern in its basis in configurations of perception as they are related by the orator-composer to a particular context or situation. The memory is

triggered by a sensory relationship between visual field and specific, oral utterance. In fact, parts of the ad Herennium's memory theory sounds similar to the field-ground relationships that are represented in current information theory. The difference, however, lies in the ad Herennium's relegation of visual imagery itself to a secondary role in the process of employing rhetorical memory. When orators remember, they remember through sound, through a sensorium (Ong's term) that places echoes of the spoken word against a perceived visual background. The visual background, itself, is brought to mind by the recalling of a particular speech in a particular political or forensic setting, in the mouths of particular orators in particular historical contexts. The word dramatically posed, coming into and out of being as heard becomes the orator's way of recalling particular tropes, figures, schemes. The tropes and schemes themselves--codified in technical rhetorical manuals such as the ad Herennium and the De Inventione, function as a secondary repository of written tools that must be naturally called to mind by the "good man speaking."

In the De Inventione, Cicero emphasizes the orator's necessary control over the order of the parts of the oration. Actually, the orator's sense of immediate forensic context should, for Cicero in the De Inventione, define the application and order of presentation of the exordium, narration, partition, confirmation, refutation and peroration. Only after orators have figured out what issue or issues are important to a

particular case--by employing a very specific re-working of Hermagoras's issue theory--can they use prescribed, written forms to form the presentation of that case. Writing remains secondary, once again, to immediate, oral performance.

It is important that writing teachers today remember the secondary function of writing in oral cultures while they remind themselves and their students that today's writer functions in a culture in which writing and thinking are inseparable. This is true, first, because of the massive written public record that shadows every written utterance. This shadow helps to shape what individual writers decide they need to say, to whom they need to say it, and why and how they need to say it. This is true, also, because today's composer uses writing to maintain a self-conscious sense of privacy, of original statement amidst this massive public record. Writing remains--particularly in its dimensions as a private act of composition--the educated man's primary means of retaining self-conscious control over cognitive processes in a world of secondary orality.

What, specifically, is Ong suggesting when he defines modern man's condition as one of secondary orality? He is suggesting, I believe, that our culture's emphasis on oral forms, on the presence of the word, on the immediacy of meaning as it is spoken and performed is itself conditioned by centuries of written-visual experience. We are the products of print culture and education, just as people in early literate

cultures--Plato's academy, for example-- were products of centuries of oral performance. Our ways of perceiving and knowing ^{are} are primarily ways of seeing; we/naturally--one might almost say instinctively--bent on reducing the world out there to a linear, analytical reality, most comprehensible in repeatable typeset and duplicatable, linear pages. This emphasis, of course, has been the source of incredible power for Western people, helping to create Roman and later European people's extensions of themselves over vast spaces and territories. Confronted with a new emphasis on oral forms, however, these visual emphases of a print culture create incredible stress and tension in the individual composer. Subconsciously aware of the primacy of technology and its reliance on print culture's ways of organizing the human sensorium and the reality that sensorium perceives, the student in today's college writing class nonetheless has been influenced and shaped by oral contexts--by television talk shows, rap sessions, increased conversation caused by a greater range of everyday human contact, by large doses of spoken language assaulting the individual during almost every waking moment.

Some theorists--McLuhan foremost among them--have often suggested that this communications schizophrenia might result in a fuller, more synthesized mode of expression and communication, where talk and writing interact to produce richer meaning for all. This, however, has decidedly not been the case in

most secondary and college English classes in the past twenty years; the reasons this has not been the case should be obvious to anyone attuned to Ong's analyses of the effects of media on human expression.

Our students' orality is not the formulaic, highly structured orality of a primary culture. It comes in bits and pieces, without either the linguistic or larger epic structural forms that were traditional to the oral formulaic culture. Surely the secondary oral tradition is replete with its clichés and aphorisms, its catch phrases and terms. These oral elements, however, are never brought together by individuals even remotely similar to the oral poet and performer, who was a master technician in the verbal art, someone who consciously kept culture knitted together while entertaining and educating. These clichés and aphorisms are not signs of cultural control and tradition intact in everyday conversation, rather they are rightly seen by teachers and language authorities as oral residue artificially grafted on to the more serious business of producing written documents. These oral elements, teachers say, must be expunged from the written record and replaced by language both original to the writer and shared by the community of educated people.

Our students know this. They know that their language is too often a mishmash of talk and high--read written--style. Teachers know it, too. That is why they often, in freshman writing courses in college, place so much emphasis on voice--on

the individual writer's ability to weave together his or her own style of speaking and the standard linguistic and conceptual forms of educated English. This usually noble effort fails, however, for a rather simple reason. Explaining that reason will return me to the problems of belief that I mentioned in beginning this essay.

In a highly self-conscious culture such as ours, people need to perceive a relationship between their individual and social selves. Applied to the context of the writer, this need to assimilate is primarily structural. The highly private, traditional patterns of linear thought, conditioned by print and the left-branching nature of written language itself, must somehow be seen as part of--rather than intrusions into--an ongoing cultural dialogue. Only then will the habit of private, inner speech that, in a highly literate culture, is actually learned in earliest childhood become a positive and useful way of maintaining individual perspective in a world of often disembodied oral voices. The act of writing--particularly when it is seen as a primary rather than secondary medium--is the process that enables inner speech and oral dialogue to synthesize. Written composing becomes, in the condition of secondary orality, our culture's means of preserving the private consciousness of literate cultures while combining that consciousness with a renewed sense of the word's presence. To reverse this concept, written composing becomes, also, the means of structuring the spoken word so that it can re-capture

the authority it once had in primary oral cultures. The mystery, drama, and authority of the spoken word then is naturally assimilated with the self-consciously analytical qualities of the written word.

These are grand ideas in the context of everyday school life. But these contrasts between oral and written media are central to the problems of teaching writing today, and they have immediate, practical implications.

1. They should convince us that our students must use writing to explore and know about their own ideas and feelings. Writing cannot be taught as if it begins as public record. Whenever writing functions as a primary medium, it takes on as well the function of structuring the inner speech of the individual.
2. They should convince us that looking back on rough drafts might be the best way to build a curriculum around writing-talking relationships. This truism suggests a methodology built around workshops and public response to written monologues. The work of James Moffett has far-reaching application here.
3. In the process of composing in writing, students must come to realize how their inner speech naturally connects with the culture's general written record. What is thought in private and what is said in public are always assimilated in effective writing.

These and other classroom implications, however, must be premised on what writing means to us in a condition of secondary orality. It is our way of keeping the best of print-culture--its analytical, distanced, and individualized perspectives--intact in the presence of today's oral word. It must be, simply put, our way of re-instilling belief in the efficacy of the written word.

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NOTE ON SOURCES

The background ideas for this paper are drawn generally from the following works:

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Havelock, Eric. Preface to Plato. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963.

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No specific citations or particular ideas were drawn from these or other sources.

ABSTRACT

"Teaching Writing in the Condition of Secondary Orality"

This paper discussed problems of teaching writing in college in the context of Walter Ong's contention that our culture is moving from the primarily visual-analytical perspective of print technology to a primarily oral culture, informed by the technical reproductions and representations of the spoken word. Ong distinguishes between primary and secondary oral cultures by emphasizing the human sensorium or nervous system. The nervous system of a person in a primarily oral culture shares in the authority of the dramatized or spoken word, just as he or she shares in the technology of the formal oral tradition. The oral person is a believer in the power of the word because he or she experiences in the present moment the tradition and social authority bound into oral presentation. People in cultures in the transitional state of secondary orality are equally immersed in the word, but the word for them has been de-mythologized, stripped of its dramatic power, and undermined in its appeal to human emotion by the massive written record that rests beneath it.

The condition of secondary orality puts apprentice writers in personally and culturally schizophrenic positions. They are simultaneously aware of and unskilled in the written code; they feel the authority of the written public record but find its form alien to their language experience. They may not have been active readers in earlier grades, but they have seen and heard enough about the authority of texts to be awed by the written record's often subtle but pervasive presence. In contrast, however, they are most naturally speakers of the word, often organizing all their ideas and experience in the basically unanalytical and discursive patterns of everyday conversation. They are not, as is the educated writer, self-conscious about the patterns of organization they may use as they speak. In addition, because they exist in a secondary rather than primary oral culture, they cannot turn to the formal patterns and techniques that were available to the primary oral poet. Today's oral tradition does not have a base invested in authority--no one is responsible for the tradition as the oral composer-poet was usually responsible for cultural paideia. The result is a lack of belief in the authority of the written word.

The paper closes with changes in attitude and pedagogy that might help the teacher of writing recognize and use to advantage this cultural schizophrenia and its resulting crisis of belief. These pedagogical suggestions focus on the implications of recent research into the composing process, most particularly the emphases in the work of James Moffett on the integration of spoken and written language within the composing process, the use of dialogues built around systematic staging of draft assignments, and the teaching of greater sensitivity and conscious control over the rhetorical contexts in which students write papers. All these pedagogical implications are aimed at re-instilling student belief in the personal and social advantages of becoming more fluent in written composition.